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ABSTRACT

Based on statewide surveys of school superintendents, these two papers examine cooperation in the organization of Minnesota school districts, concentrating on cooperative arrangements between two or more districts tailored to meet those districts' needs. Such cooperation includes efforts ranging from sharing instructional technology to sharing entire grades. Most common types of sharing involve sharing teachers, athletic/extracurricular programs and facilities, or equipment. The least common types of cooperation are sharing grades and sharing administrators. Districts use cooperation primarily at the secondary level, reflecting the needs of these students for more choice in courses, athletics, and extracurricular activities. Small rural districts have the highest participation levels in every type of cooperation except instructional technology. Most districts use cooperation to maintain or expand curriculum, but it may also help manage low and declining enrollments, reduce costs, save schools, avoid consolidation, and maintain autonomy. Cooperation can effectively ameliorate all these problems. But cooperation between large and small districts can be difficult, governance can be cumbersome, and administration can be difficult and impractical. Parents and the community are often the greatest impediment to cooperation, but a strong public relations program can swing opinion toward cooperation. If students are pleased with the results, even skeptical parents will become supporters. (DHP)

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The Organization of Education

Working Papers 1 and 2

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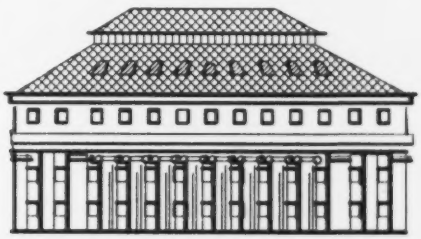

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The Organization of Education

Working Paper #1

District Cooperation: A Description

October 1988

This is the first paper in a series on the organization of education. It describes the types and extent of district cooperation agreements and analyzes the characteristics of districts involved in these efforts.

This working paper was prepared by **SUSAN URAHN**, Legislative Analyst. Questions may be referred to her (612) 296-5043.

MARY JANE LEHNERTZ and **KERRY KINNEY FINE**, Legislative Analysts, assisted in the data analysis and preparation of the paper.

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SUMMARY

This is the first paper in a series on the organization of education. This paper, and several to follow, examine the use of cooperation in school districts. They concentrate on cooperative arrangements between two or more districts tailored to meet those districts' needs. This broad category, referred to here as district cooperation agreements, includes efforts ranging from sharing instructional technology to sharing entire grades.

The major research findings, based on a survey we conducted of all districts, are presented below.

FINDING	PAGE
School districts reported 16 different types of cooperation, which can be divided into three basic categories: district cooperation agreements, cooperatives, and extradistrict cooperation.	2
Every Minnesota school district cooperates, if a broad definition of cooperation is used that includes all of the 16 types listed in the glossary.	3
Within the category of district cooperation agreements, the most prevalent types involve sharing teachers, athletic/extracurricular programs, and facilities/equipment.	3
Districts use cooperation primarily at the secondary level.	6
The most difficult kinds of cooperation are those that generally require a considerable investment of district resources, decrease district autonomy, or generate community concern. Considering these factors, three types of cooperation are the most difficult for districts: the sharing of grades, administrators, and athletic/extracurricular programs.	7
Districts involved in difficult forms of cooperation differ significantly from other districts on three major factors: they tend to be smaller, more sparsely populated, and have declining enrollments.	9
Districts involved in simple cooperation are less affected by enrollment, sparsity, and enrollment changes than are districts involved in difficult cooperation.	13
Urban and rural districts have different patterns of cooperation. Small rural districts have the highest participation levels in every type of cooperation except instructional technology.	14
Membership in formal cooperatives is widespread: three types of these cooperatives include over 50% of the districts as members.	15
About one-fourth of the districts are involved in cooperative efforts with local county governments.	16

INTRODUCTION

This is the first in a series of working papers on the organization of education. The first several papers address cooperation among Minnesota school districts, based on a year long study by the Research Department.

WHAT IS COOPERATION?

Interdistrict cooperation is the voluntary sharing of resources between two or more school districts. Resources, broadly defined, can include students, teachers, administrators and other personnel, facilities, equipment, transportation, and purchasing.

Interdistrict cooperation is a generic term encompassing a wide variety of cooperative options for school districts. These can be classified into three general types: 1) district cooperation agreements -- cooperation tailored to fit each district's needs; 2) cooperatives -- structured organizations that exist apart from districts; and 3) extradistrict cooperation -- cooperation efforts with local governmental units, area businesses or post-secondary institutions. Definitions of all cooperative options reported by the districts are found on the next page.

WHY DO DISTRICTS COOPERATE?

Since the 1960s, interdistrict cooperation has been proposed as a solution for many of the problems faced by school districts of all sizes. Some of the reasons districts choose to cooperate are listed below:

Curriculum, particularly in small secondary schools, may be very limited. Cooperation allows districts to offer more comprehensive academic and extracurricular programs.

Academic programs can be maintained or expanded at a lower per pupil cost. Through joint purchasing and shared equipment and facilities, cooperation minimizes the need for districts to purchase expensive items for the use of only a few students.

Cooperation gives districts a cost effective way to provide quality educational programs for special student populations (such as special education or gifted and talented).

Cooperation allows a district to maintain its independence and its presence in the community.

WHAT IS THIS PAPER ABOUT?

This paper focuses on the first type of cooperation -- district cooperation agreements. We chose this focus because there has been little systematic research on the statewide patterns of these widespread and varied arrangements.

Section I describes the amount and types of district cooperation agreements, and analyzes the characteristics of districts involved in these efforts.

Section II contains a brief overview of district participation in cooperatives and extradistrict cooperation.

This paper is based on data from a House Research Department survey and Department of Education enrollment information. We surveyed superintendents in 433 Minnesota school districts by mail to determine the extent of interdistrict cooperation. We received responses from 423 districts (98% of the districts surveyed).

Future papers will examine policy issues and fiscal and legal implications of cooperation.

A GLOSSARY OF COOPERATION

School districts reported 16 different types of cooperation. We divided these cooperative efforts into three broad categories: 1) district cooperation agreements, 2) cooperatives, and (3) extradistrict cooperation. The specific types of cooperation in each category are listed below.

District Cooperation Agreements

Grade sharing -- Entire grades are sent between districts, full or part-time, through pairing or tuition agreements.

Administrator sharing -- School administrators provide their services to more than one district.

Athletic/extracurricular program sharing -- Students from more than one district participate in programs outside the classroom.

Student sharing -- Selected students are sent between districts for one or more classes.

Teacher sharing -- One or more teachers provide classes by moving among multiple districts.

Professional sharing -- Professional staff (e.g. nurses, social workers, counselors) provide services to more than one district.

Staff development sharing -- Activities and programs are jointly offered to staff in more than one district.

Facilities/equipment/purchasing/transportation sharing -- Districts jointly purchase and/or use facilities or equipment.

Instructional technology -- two or more districts jointly provide programs through technological means.

Cooperatives

ECSUs (Educational Cooperative Service Units) -- Regional organizations designed to provide educational planning and services to the school districts within the region.

Intermediate Districts -- Consortia of metropolitan districts formed to provide vocational, special education, and low-incidence population programs to member districts.

Education Districts -- Organizations of at least four districts established to increase educational opportunities through cooperation.

Vocational Cooperatives -- Organizations that provide vocational programs and services to the member districts.

Special Education Cooperatives -- Organizations that provide special education programs and services to member districts.

Other Cooperatives -- Organizations that provide a specified service (e.g. educational technology, telecommunications) to member districts.

Extradistrict Cooperation

Districts work with other entities, including local governmental units, area businesses, and post-secondary institutions to provide services and equipment.

I. DISTRICT COOPERATION AGREEMENTS

WHAT TYPES OF COOPERATION HAVE DISTRICTS CHOSEN?

Every Minnesota school district cooperates, using a broad definition of cooperation that includes all of the types listed in the glossary. This section examines participation in one category of cooperation -- district cooperation agreements -- which includes cooperative arrangements tailored to fit the needs of the participating districts.

Within this category of cooperation, the most prevalent types involve sharing teachers, athletic/extracurricular programs, and facilities or equipment (see figure 1). The sharing of teachers and facilities/equipment may have a great potential payoff for districts: they require a minimum of district involvement, can provide significant benefits, and allow districts to maintain their autonomy. Athletics/extracurricular activities are frequently more difficult to arrange, but may be necessary because of low district enrollments.

The least common types of cooperation are sharing grades and sharing administrators. Although these types of cooperation may meet districts' program and staffing needs, they also require extensive interdistrict coordination and some surrender of autonomy from participating districts.

Most districts reported involvement in multiple types of cooperation. Districts are counted in each type they reported.

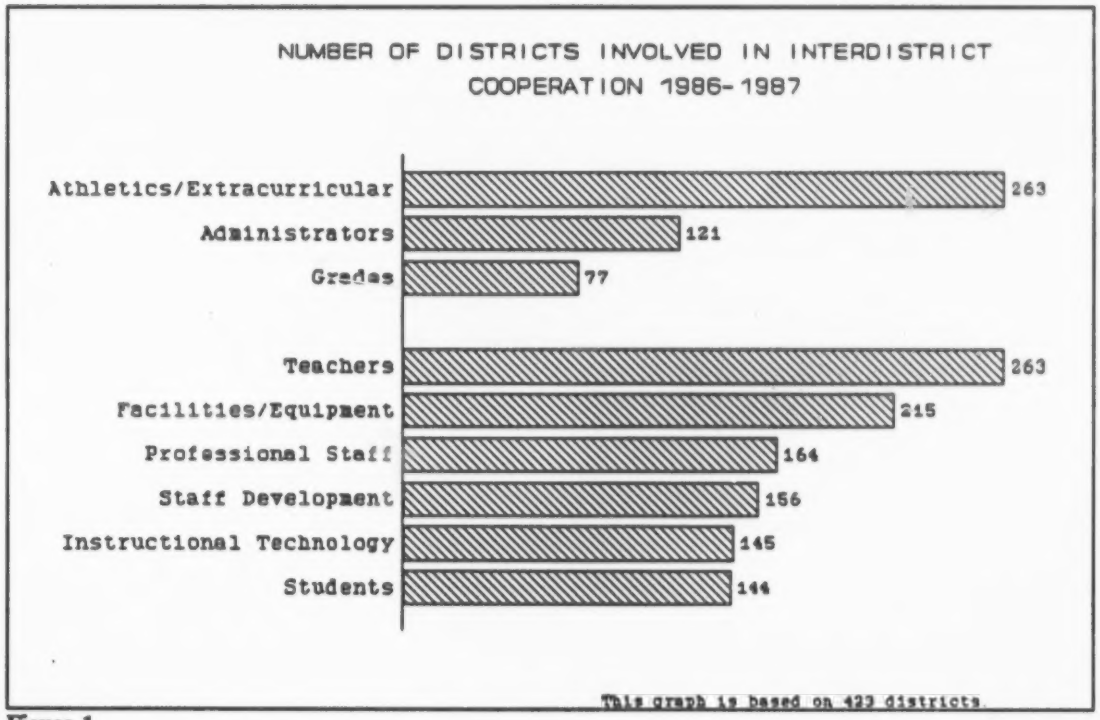


Figure 1

HOW DOES COOPERATION OPERATE?

The following three figures illustrate the arrangements of some districts' cooperation efforts.

Figure 2 is an example of a common sharing arrangement that involves students. These two small districts each send a small number of students to the other district for just one or two courses.

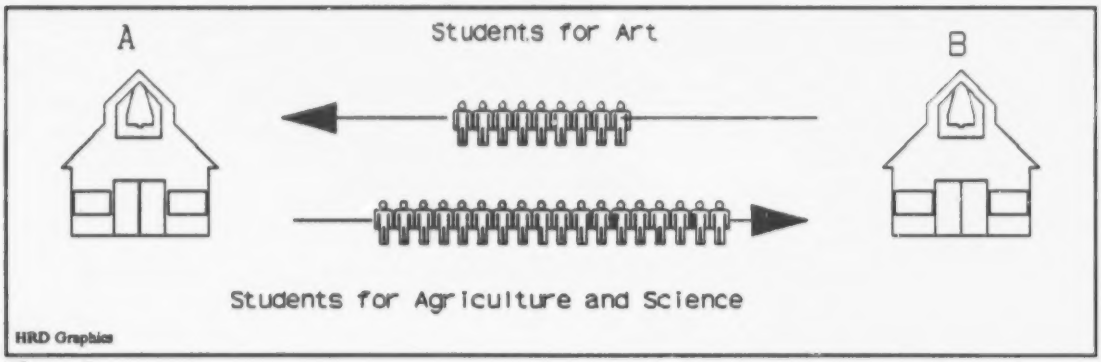


Figure 2

Figure 3 shows a slightly less common arrangement. Here there are three districts involved, all relatively small. The three districts have established an interdistrict cooperation agreement for sharing grades. District A has its own superintendent, while districts B and C share a superintendent.

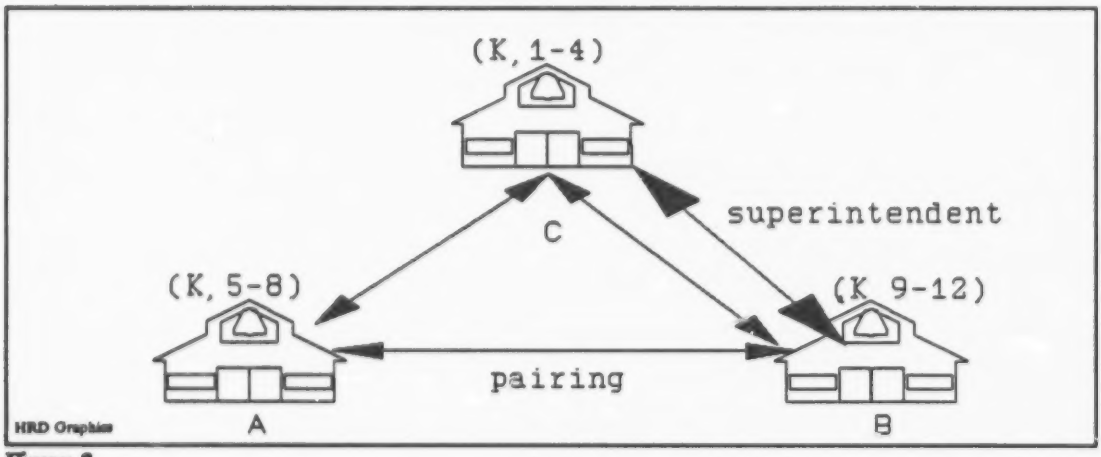


Figure 3

Figure 4 shows an unusual arrangement involving seven districts and a number of different types of cooperation:

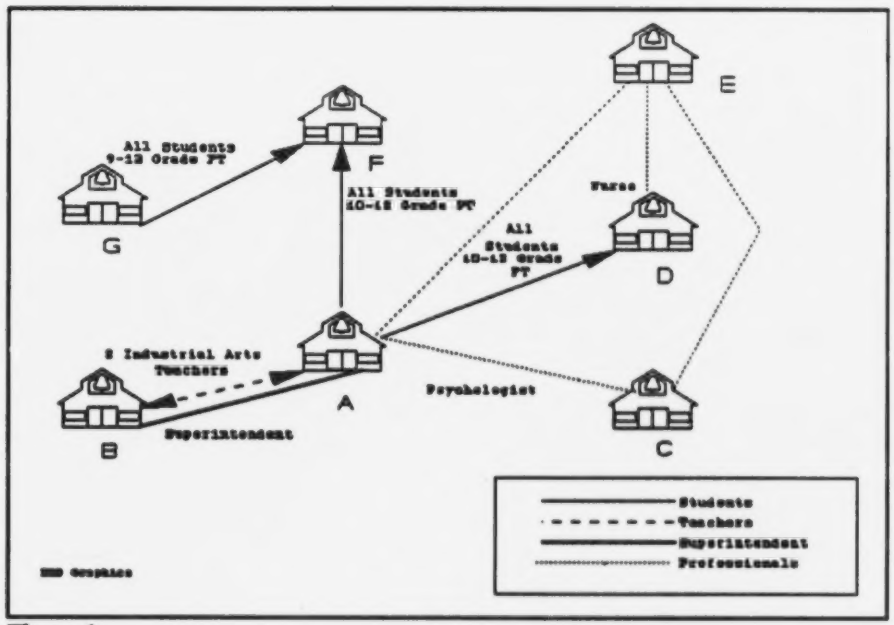


Figure 4

District A shares a psychologist with districts C and E; district D shares a nurse with district E.

District A sends some 10-12th grade students to district D for parts of the day and some to district F for part of the day; district G sends all 9-12th grade students to district F full time.

District A shares two industrial arts teachers with district B.

District A shares a superintendent with district B.

AT WHAT GRADE LEVEL DOES COOPERATION TAKE PLACE?

Districts use cooperation primarily at the secondary level. This reflects the needs of middle and high school students for more choice in courses, athletics and extracurricular activities. Sharing administrators is the only type of cooperation that occurs often at the elementary level. The graph below shows the distribution of cooperation between the elementary and secondary levels.

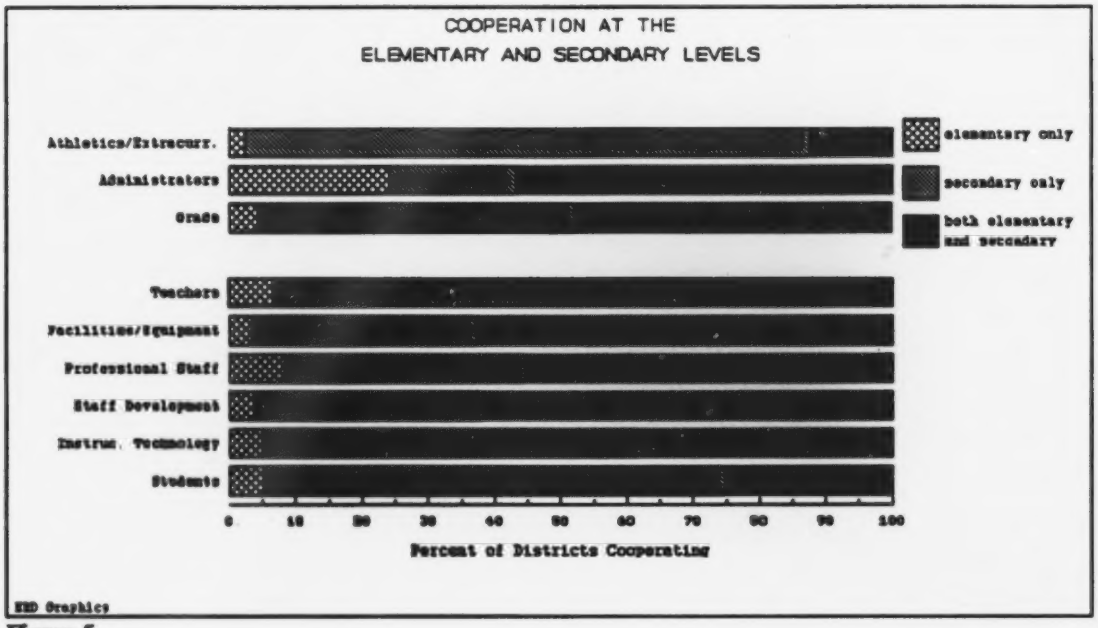


Figure 5

WHICH TYPES OF COOPERATION ARE MOST DIFFICULT?

The most difficult kinds of cooperation are those that generally require a considerable investment of district resources, decrease district autonomy, or generate community concern. In contrast, the simplest kinds of cooperation are those that do not generate these problems.

From the districts' point of view, why is sharing a grade very different than cooperative staff development programs or joint purchasing? We think primarily for three reasons.

1. *Commitment of district resources*

   The resources districts invest in cooperation range from very limited (e.g. simply paying tuition for a few students to attend another district) to quite extensive (e.g. staff time for planning, implementation, and ongoing administration or investment in new equipment).

2. *Loss of district autonomy*

   The types of cooperation vary in the degree of control that districts retain over their curriculum, schedule, budgets, and students.

3. *Community concern*

   Cooperative programs that threaten community identity or control usually generate greater community concern than other kinds of cooperation.

Using these three factors, three types of cooperation can be classified as difficult while six types can be viewed as simple.

Difficult	Simple
Grade sharing	Student sharing
Administrator sharing	Teacher sharing
Athletic/extracurricular sharing	Professional sharing
	Staff development sharing
	Facilities/equipment/purchasing/ transportation sharing
	Instructional technology sharing

Figure 6 shows the percentage of cooperating and non-cooperating districts.

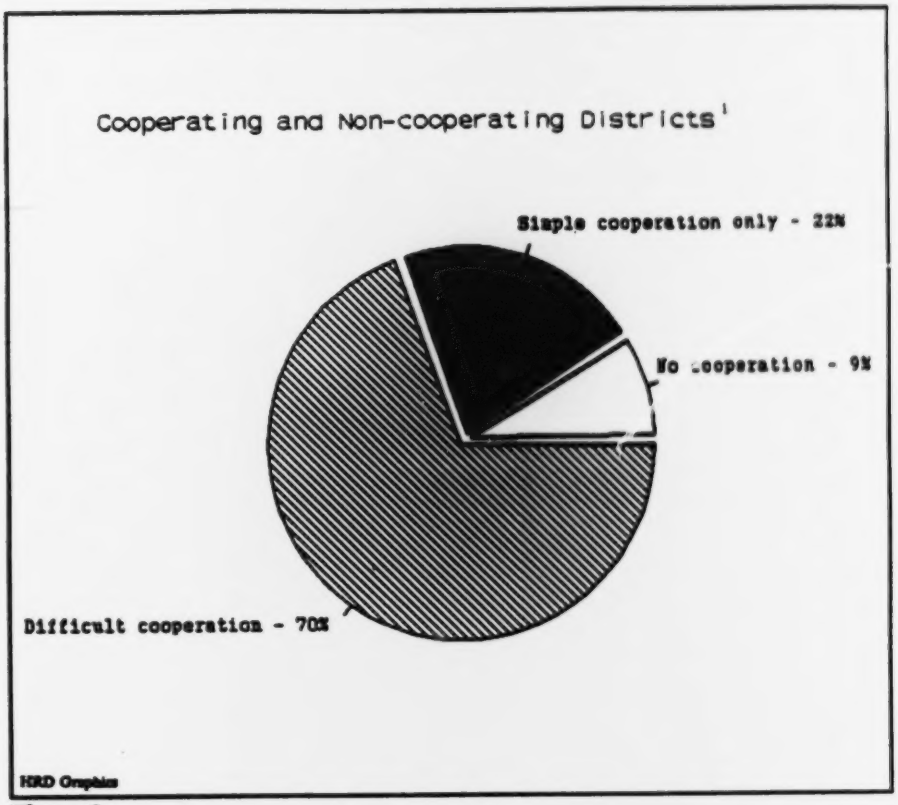


Figure 6

[1]Most districts are involved in multiple types of cooperation. For this part of the analysis, districts were classified by whether they engaged in any difficult cooperation, only simple cooperation, or no cooperation. Percentages do not add to 100 because of rounding.

WHAT CHARACTERIZES DISTRICTS INVOLVED IN DIFFICULT COOPERATION?

Districts involved in difficult forms of cooperation differ significantly from other districts on three major factors: enrollment, population sparsity, and recent enrollment change.

These differences are displayed in the continuum below (figure 7). On the left end are small, sparse districts with declining enrollments. On the right end are large, dense, growing districts. Districts engaged in difficult cooperation tend to be like those on the left end; districts not engaged in cooperation tend to be like those on the right end; districts engaged in simple cooperation fall between the mythical "average" district in the center and those on the right.

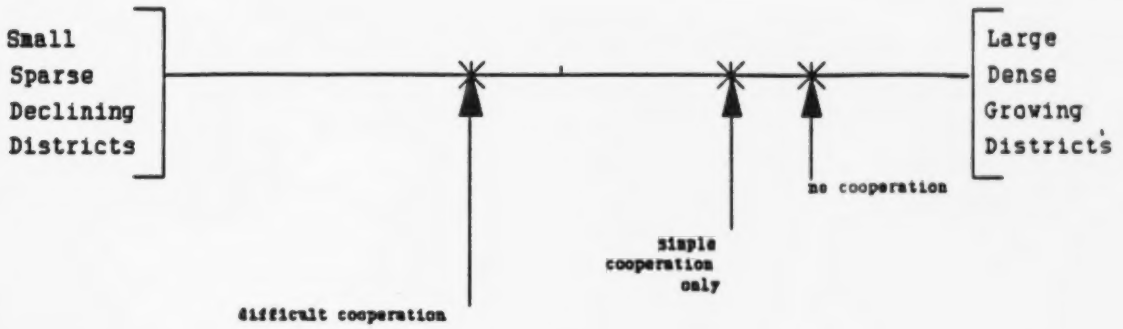


Figure 7 [1]

A definition of each of these three factors and their importance in understanding interdistrict cooperation are discussed below:

Enrollment: Low enrollment is one of the most important factors in whether districts choose to cooperate. A small student population has two important effects on districts: (1) less money for the district (both aid and revenue) and (2) difficulty offering courses that limited numbers of students need or want. This is particularly true at the secondary level for such courses as advanced science or math and foreign languages. Enrollment is defined as the average 1986-87 K-12 ADM enrollment.

District Sparsity: Sparsity may have two different effects on cooperation: (1) very sparse districts may have more incentive to cooperate, primarily because of very low enrollments, and (2) very sparse districts that are large or have an unevenly distributed student population may find that the distance to other districts impedes cooperation. Sparsity is defined as the number of students per square mile in a district.

Enrollment Changes: Since low enrollment is an important influence on district cooperation, declining enrollment may serve as a warning, signalling the need to find less expensive ways to provide the same level of service. Enrollment change is defined as the percent enrollment change between 1985-86 and 1987-88.

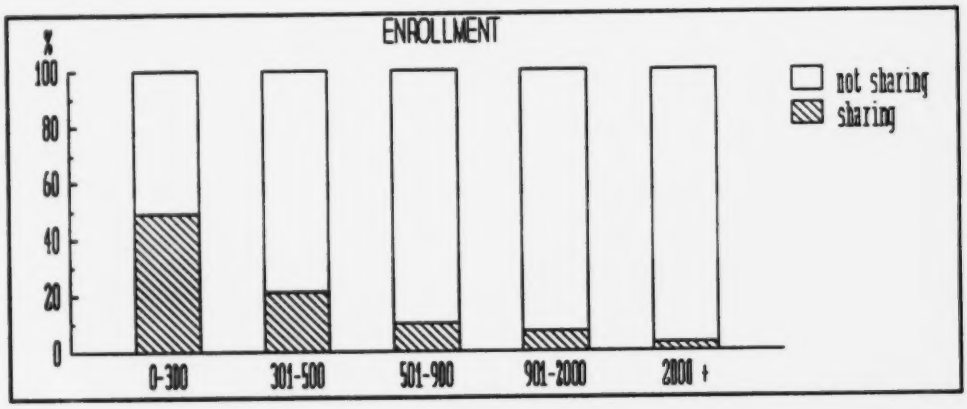
Each of these factors can be applied to each of the three complex types of cooperation. The graphs on the following pages illustrate the effects of these factors.

---

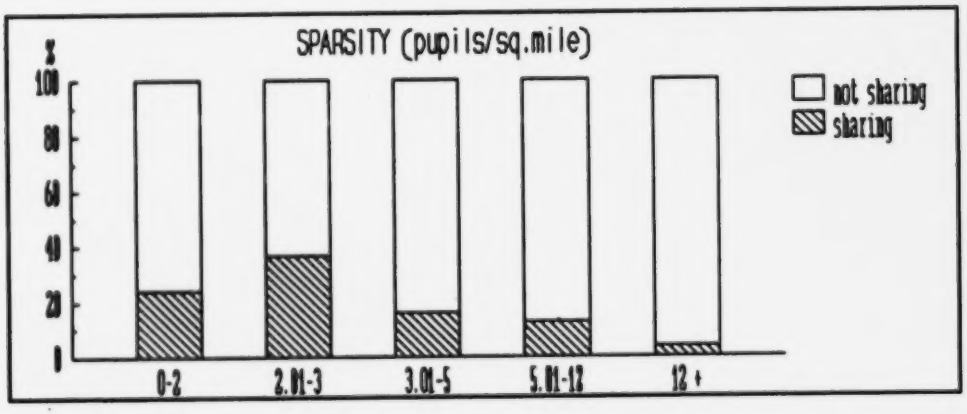
[1] These groups of districts were placed on the continuum using a statistical technique called discriminant analysis. This analysis evaluates the relative importance of enrollment, sparsity and enrollment change in determining whether a district participates in cooperation.

THE PERCENTAGE OF DISTRICTS SHARING A GRADE . . .

... declines as district size increases.



... is greatest in sparse, but not the sparsest, districts.



... is greatest in districts with declining enrollments.

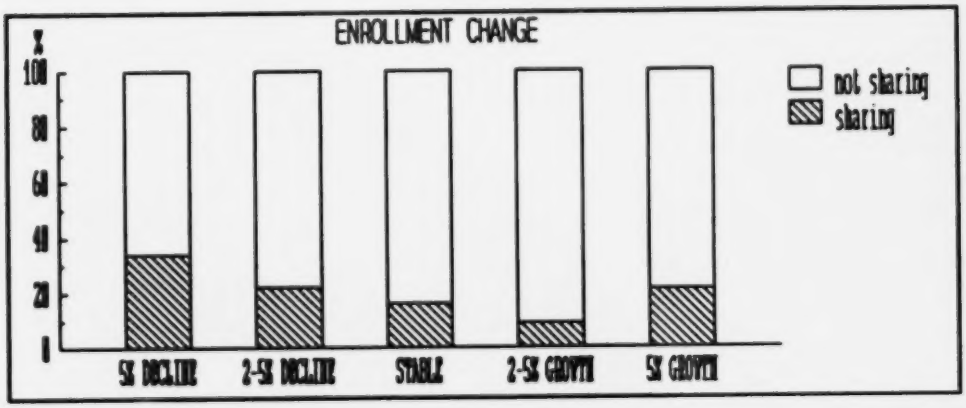
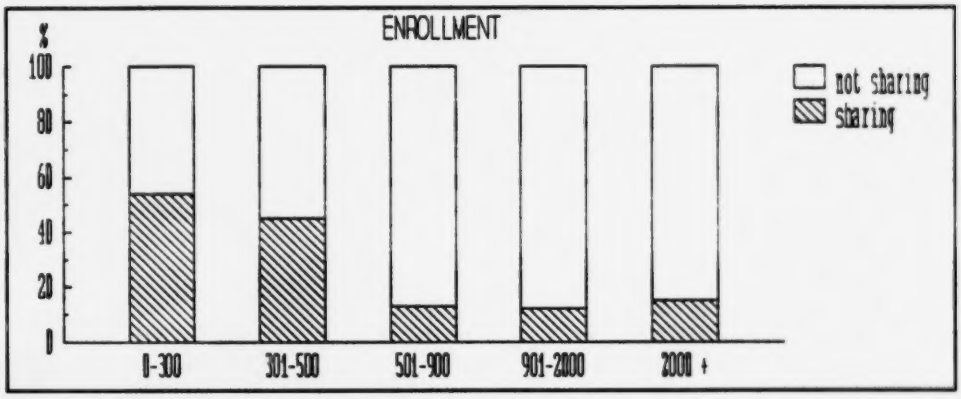


Figure 8

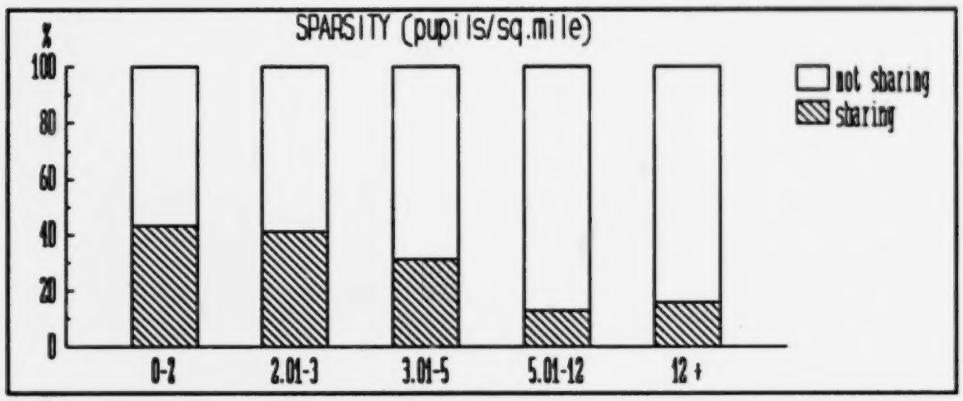
HRD Graphics

THE PERCENTAGE OF DISTRICTS SHARING ADMINISTRATORS . . .

... is greatest in the smaller districts



... is greatest in the sparser districts



... is greatest in districts with declining enrollments

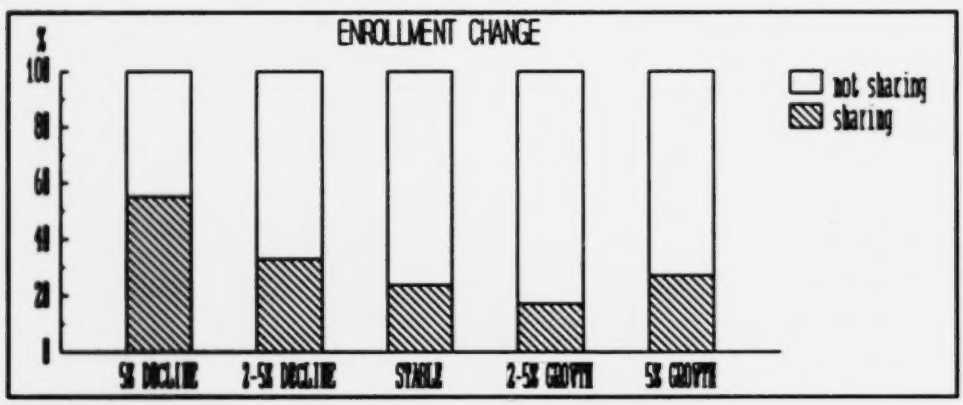
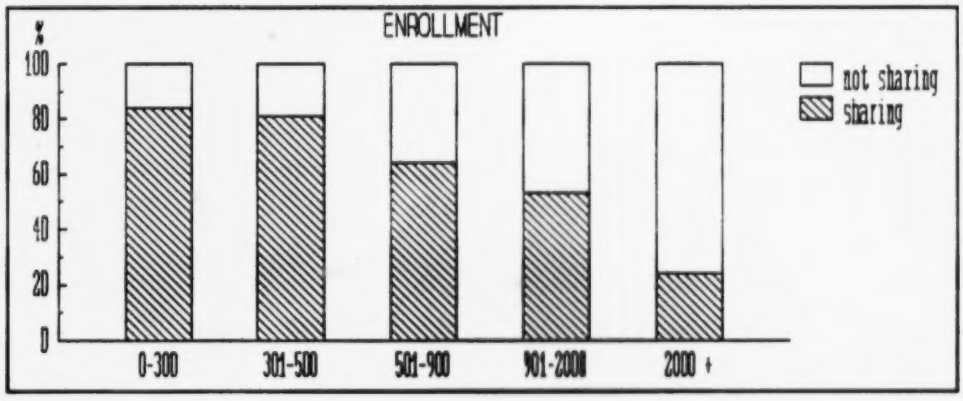


Figure 9

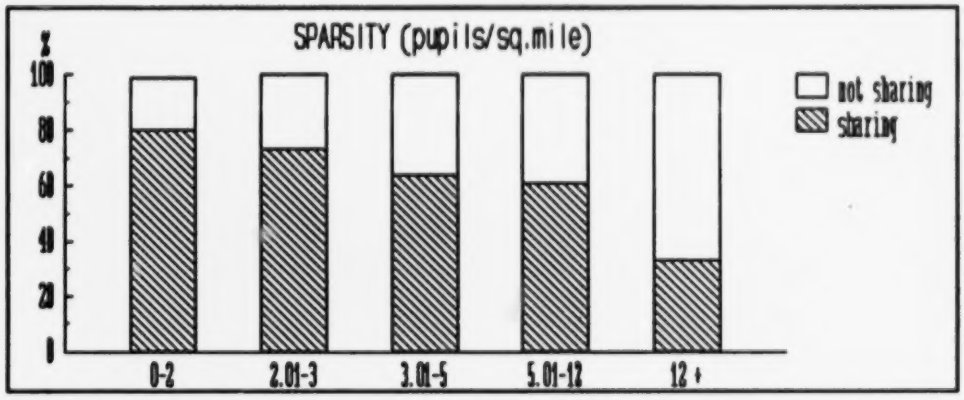
HRD Graphics

THE PERCENTAGE OF DISTRICTS SHARING ATHLETIC/EXTRACURRICULAR . . .

... is very high in all but the largest districts



... is very high in all but the most dense districts



... is greater in districts with declining enrollments

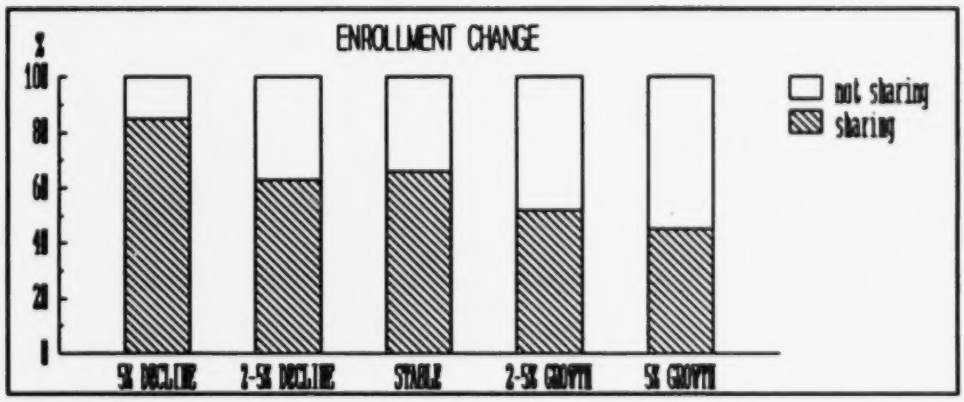


Figure 10

HRD Graphics

WHAT CHARACTERIZES DISTRICTS INVOLVED IN SIMPLE COOPERATION?

Districts involved in simple cooperation are less affected by enrollment, sparsity, and enrollment changes than are districts involved in difficult cooperation. Among districts involved in simple cooperation:

- smaller, sparser districts are more likely to be sharing teachers and professional staff
- larger, growing districts are more likely to be sharing facilities and equipment, including instructional technology
- growing and moderate size districts are more likely to be sharing instructional technology.

ARE THERE URBAN/RURAL DIFFERENCES IN COOPERATION?

To describe the distribution of cooperation around the state, districts were categorized into four types based on their enrollment and their rural or urban setting. This creates the following four types:

Metro - all districts in the seven county metropolitan area.

Urban non-metro - all districts outside the metropolitan area that have an urban area with a population of 5000 or more.

Large rural - all districts without an urban area of at least 5000 but with an average enrollment of at least 50 students per grade.

Small rural - all districts without an urban area of at least 5000 but with an average enrollment of less than 50 students per grade.

Small rural districts have the highest participation levels in every type of cooperation except instructional technology.

The table below shows the percentage of districts in each category that are engaged in each type of cooperation.

PERCENTAGE OF DISTRICTS INVOLVED IN EACH TYPE OF COOPERATION

	Type of Cooperation	Metro	Urban Non-Metro	Large Rural	Small Rural
DIFFICULT					
	Grades	0	9	17	26
	Administrators	17	12	20	41
	Athletics	28	37	57	79
SIMPLE					
	Students	33	26	33	37
	Teachers	37	40	52	81
	Professionals	24	30	27	52
	Staff Develop.	37	26	31	44
	Facilities/ Equipment	57	35	39	61
	Instructional Technology	32	38	38	33

II. COOPERATIVES AND EXTRADISTRICT COOPERATION

This section provides an overview of district participation in cooperatives and in cooperative efforts with counties. Districts engage in extradistrict cooperation with other entities, including businesses and post-secondary institutions, but sufficient data were not collected on these for presentation here.

HOW MANY DISTRICTS BELONG TO COOPERATIVES?

Membership in cooperatives is widespread: three types include over 50% of the districts as members. Figure 11 shows that almost all districts belong to ECSUs (99%) and most of them belong to special education cooperatives (85%). Over half belong to "other" cooperatives that are primarily educational technology or telecommunications cooperatives, and cooperatives offering administrative computer support. About one-third (37%) of the districts belong to vocational cooperatives.

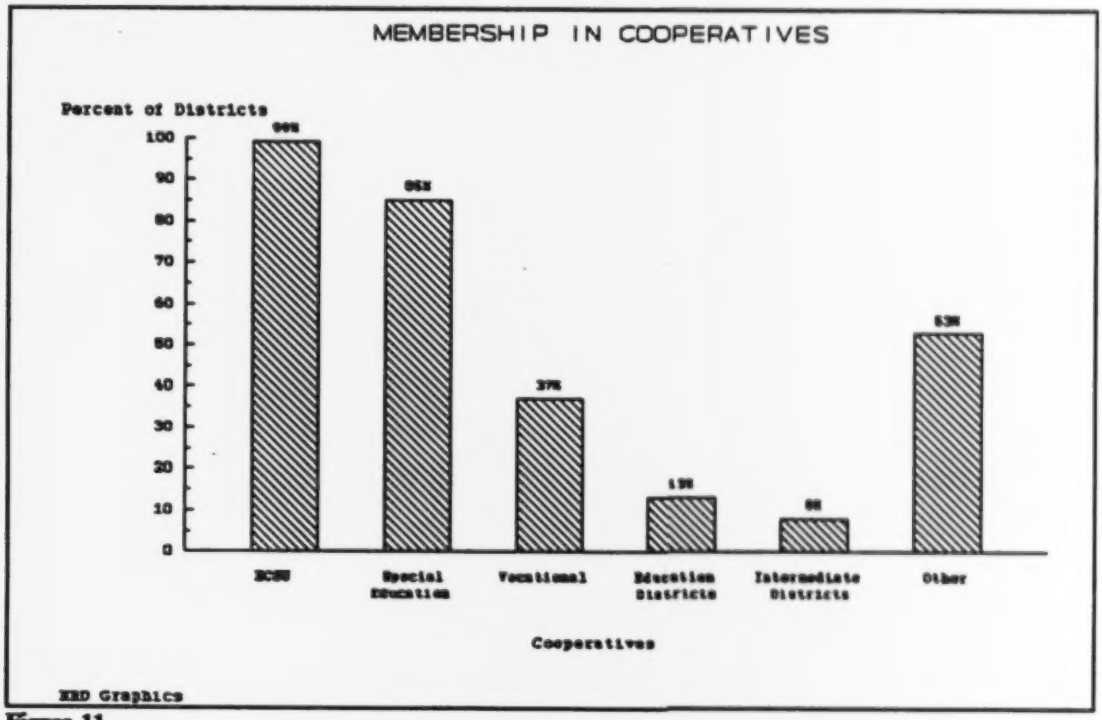


Figure 11

WHAT ARE DISTRICTS DOING WITH COUNTIES?

About one-fourth of the districts are involved in cooperative efforts with local county governments. As figure 12 shows, this cooperation most commonly occurs in health services.

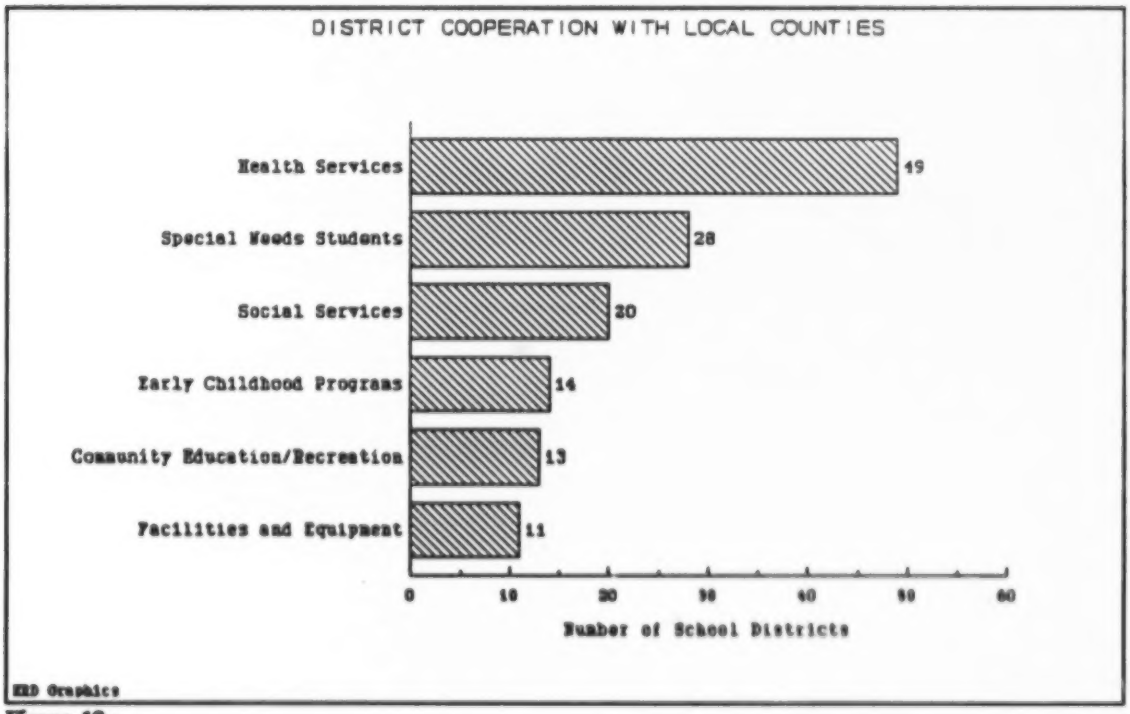


Figure 12

The Organization of Education

Working Paper #2

District Cooperation: Policy Issues and Implications

October 1988

This is the second in a series of working papers on the organization of education. In this paper we ask a simple but critical question about cooperation among districts: how well does it work? We explore the issues and problems of cooperation raised in interviews with superintendents representing 112 school districts.

This working paper was prepared by **SUSAN URAHN**, Legislative Analyst. Questions may be referred to her (612) 296-5043.

MARY JANE LEHNERTZ and **KERRY KINNEY FINE**, Legislative Analysts, assisted in the data analysis and preparation of the paper.

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SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

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Superintendents report that cooperation helps districts reach four fundamental goals: (1) to maintain or expand curriculum; (2) to manage low or declining enrollment; (3) to save schools, avoid consolidation, and maintain autonomy; and (4) to control costs.

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Most superintendents believe that cooperation is a valuable tool for maintaining and expanding the curriculum, managing low and declining enrollment, and controlling cost while maintaining district autonomy. Districts can build on their strengths when they have the freedom to tailor cooperation to meet specific needs.

However, superintendents also believe that cooperation sometimes only delays the inevitable collapse of some small districts.

Superintendents report a variety of practical problems with both the governance and administration of cooperating districts.

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Superintendents report that parents and community members can play two very different roles as districts make decisions about whether to cooperate: (1) parental pressure can move districts toward cooperation, or (2) parents and community members can be the greatest impediment to district cooperation. Community pressure can also affect the type of cooperation districts choose.

In many cases, this pressure was the result of the conflicting goals among superintendents, parents and community members.

Students play a key role in cooperation. Many superintendents stress that satisfied students can convince skeptical parents that cooperation is both worthwhile and successful.

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State policy on school district cooperation in Minnesota is to offer districts a variety of organizational alternatives and some financial support, but to leave decisions about cooperation to individual districts.

This section of the paper discusses how well district cooperation meets state policy goals.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines districts involved in the more difficult kinds of cooperation as defined in the first paper[1] (grades, administrators, and athletic/extracurricular programs) and the two types of cooperation most likely to involve academics: sharing students and sharing teachers. Information in this paper is based on a phone survey of superintendents in 112 school districts. The sample was selected in two stages. First, we identified all districts that reported using difficult or academic types of cooperation. We then randomly selected 91 of those districts. We supplemented that sample to be sure that at least two districts involved in more complex cooperative agreements were represented in the final sample. All quotes in this paper are from superintendents in this sample.

I. WHY DO DISTRICTS COOPERATE?

Superintendents gave us four reasons for engaging in more difficult and academically focused cooperation.

1. Maintain or expand curriculum;
2. manage low and declining enrollments;
3. save schools, avoid consolidation, and maintain autonomy; and
4. control cost.

Districts cooperate for different reasons because they have different needs. Large districts have different needs than small districts. Growing districts are facing different problems than declining districts.

1. **Most districts use cooperation to maintain or expand curriculum.**
   Most districts are constantly juggling dollars, students, and curriculum. There is rarely enough money to offer a widely varied curriculum regardless of the number of students in each class.

[1]Difficult cooperation was defined in the first working paper of this series as cooperation involving (1) extensive commitment of district resources, (2) loss of district autonomy, or (3) community concern.

It is not only the small districts that are concerned about curriculum. Even districts with moderate enrollment often find it difficult to offer enough curricular choice independently. Some districts have particular difficulty offering courses such as advanced math and science, or foreign language classes. Fewer students choose these classes and they require teachers with special skills.

2. **Districts use cooperation to help manage low and declining enrollments.**

Low enrollment makes it difficult for districts to provide even the minimum curriculum. These small districts are particularly concerned about the effect of increasing state curricular requirements. Many use cooperation as a tool to maintain a satisfactory curriculum as well as to provide their students with additional extracurricular and athletic opportunities.

Cooperation is also used to address some of the problems that accompany declining enrollment. Some districts must adjust the number of courses and teachers to shrinking levels of enrollment and funding. Other districts, experiencing enrollment declines that have not yet had serious effects, are using cooperation as a hedge against future problems.

> *"We wanted to [share grades], not had to. We wanted to compete with big districts."*

3. **Districts use cooperation to save schools, avoid consolidation, and maintain autonomy.**

Districts with very low or severely declining enrollments are faced with hard decisions. These districts are less concerned with expanding or even maintaining curriculum than with saving schools and holding on to some control. In some cases, cooperation can help districts save schools and control.

> *"Our district was considering consolidation or pairing. Either of these choices would have meant closing the high school. Parents and community members refused to consider any option that meant closing the high school, so the district chose to send secondary grades to another district for part of the day. This arrangement did save the high school, but the district suffered substantial staff reductions and gave up all control over the curriculum in the other district."*

4. **Districts use cooperation to control costs.**

Districts could accomplish all three of the above goals without cooperation if they only had unlimited funds. Superintendents perceive cooperation as a way to maximize curriculum, manage decline, and avoid consolidation while controlling costs.

Cooperation works very well for maintaining and expanding the curriculum.

The overwhelming majority of districts are very pleased with cooperation. It proves a relatively painless way to provide enhanced academic and extracurricular programs for students. Superintendents say, for example:

> *"We have a broader curriculum and more extracurricular programs -- better teams. Cooperation is the way of the future."*
>
> *"Without each other, we couldn't provide this curriculum."*

For most districts, the longer they are involved with curricular cooperation, the more satisfied they become.

> *"Students have grown to accept kids in the other district. We're able to continue to offer programs together that we couldn't provide alone."*
>
> *Two districts currently sharing grades are considering consolidation next year. Both districts agree that cooperation had improved the curriculum and that they had not had the problems they expected.*

But even these satisfied districts did not expect and do not like the time and difficulty involved in coordination and administration.

Districts use cooperation to maximize their curriculum in three general ways.

- ***Divide the curriculum.*** Some districts divide the curriculum and share students between them. This increases the number of students available to take classes in each district. For some districts, this entails sharing entire grades; for other districts, more limited numbers of students. This approach requires that districts jointly determine which districts maintain which aspects of the curriculum. Usually, decisions about shared aspects of the curriculum are made jointly. This alternative often involves joint decisions about staffing.

- ***Eliminate part of the curriculum.*** Districts may choose to eliminate parts of their curriculum. Students who need or want those courses attend another district part or all of the day. The resident district usually pays tuition for those students. With this

approach, districts have no control over the curriculum they choose not to offer. Using this alternative, if districts cease to offer courses or programs, they must then manage some staff reductions. If districts are simply expanding their curriculum, this may be a very efficient alternative.

- ***Share teachers.*** Districts may choose to offer the entire curriculum in both districts and share teachers. This alternative keeps the curriculum in each district and minimizes staff reductions. Some districts indicate that hiring part-time teachers, an alternative, non-cooperative solution, is less satisfactory. Teachers usually prefer not to work part-time, and districts find it virtually impossible to obtain, on a part-time basis, the specialized teachers required for some of the secondary curriculum (e.g. foreign language, advanced math and science).

Cooperation can effectively help manage low and declining enrollment.

Many superintendents respond that cooperation allows them to *"increase curricular offerings despite low enrollments."* These superintendents believe that cooperation gives them the best of all possible worlds: small schools where students can get a lot of individual attention, minimal discipline problems, and a complete curriculum.

Cooperation can prolong the survival of weak districts.

Superintendents in some districts believe that cooperation only serves to postpone consolidation. These districts are:

- very small districts cooperating with other very small districts;
- districts involved in extensive cooperation, usually sharing grades;
- districts involved in cooperation, at least in part, as a result of pressure from parents and community members.

These districts are often using cooperation, quite successfully, to save schools, avoid consolidation, and maintain autonomy. But even with extensive cooperation, they are having difficulty surviving.

One pair of districts sharing grades reports that even together they do not have enough students.

> *"Enrollments are continuing to decline, while costs are continuing to climb. We began cooperating because of pressure from parents and community – pressure generated from fear of losing schools, and fear of losing control of their children's education."*

Other superintendents express similar problems:

> *"The community is trying to keep the school as long as possible. We've got three years tops."*
>
> *"When you take two small districts and put them together, you get just one small district."*
>
> *"People view us as one large district – we're not. They think the problem is solved – it's not."*
>
> *"The community thinks we're o.k. now – they're in for a big surprise."*
>
> *"Pairing is holding on for a while. We must take a larger step."*

It is often these districts that are concerned about the initial costs of cooperation, primarily because they see cooperation as, at best, a temporary solution.

> *"A cooperative agreement prolongs the inevitable. The community will have to go through the same tirades again for consolidation."*
>
> *"We're initially going to save, but that will vanish because of declining enrollment."*

Cooperation is an effective way to control cost.

Cost is one of the four primary reasons for cooperation mentioned by superintendents.

Most superintendents report that cooperation contributes greatly to cost effectiveness but does not reduce costs. The most prevalent financial effects of cooperation that districts report include:

- Costs stay about the same, but without cooperation, costs would be much higher.
- Costs increase, but curriculum expands. In almost all cases, superintendents believe the curricular benefits far outweigh the cost increases.

In these cases, cooperation apparently allows districts to maintain or increase their curriculum while controlling increases in cost.

Superintendents in some districts did report significant reductions in costs. These tend to be very small districts (often with enrollments of under 300 students). They tend to be extensively involved in cooperation, often sharing grades. They also tend to be districts without too many other options. They cannot survive without substantial changes.

With the data we collected, it is difficult to determine the relationship among cooperation, cost, and curriculum. When superintendents report reduced costs, it is not clear whether that reduction is accompanied by a reduction in curriculum, or whether there are cases where cooperation effectively reduces costs without reducing curriculum.

Many districts note that cooperation can involve a significant initial investment. This is particularly true of districts sharing secondary grades. In many cases, these paired districts get new names, new athletic uniforms and new band uniforms, often at no small cost. Many districts must also provide early retirement or unemployment benefits for teachers in discontinued positions. While many superintendents feel that long term savings will justify the initial investment, some are concerned about recouping these costs.

An additional cost often overlooked, is that of the increased work load while the cooperation is implemented. One superintendent reports that he *"worked a hundred nights"* during the first year his district shared grades.

Cooperation between large and small districts can be difficult.

Cooperation between districts of different size can create many problems for both the larger and smaller district.

Most of these problems revolve around districts' need to feel equal partners in cooperation. A fundamental issue is whether cooperating districts of different size or wealth get equal say in matters concerning both districts. One expression of this issue is "one district, one vote."

Some of the specific problems cooperating districts of different size report include:

- Districts of different sizes often have different needs. If districts are not working toward the same ends, it can be difficult to establish a mutually beneficial cooperative

program. One superintendent noted that *"large districts want bells and whistles; small districts just want the basics."*

> *"Our district uses [cooperation] the most. We consider it very valuable. The other districts don't value it as much."*

- It can be difficult to determine the division of control over staff and curriculum when the balance of cooperation between districts is skewed (e.g. one district has much larger enrollment, or one district pays a higher percentage of the costs).

- Small districts must often give up a great deal when cooperating with larger districts. In most disparate pairing arrangements the smaller district gives up the high school.

- Smaller districts often fear being swallowed up by the larger district.

> *One large district trying to initiate cooperation was accused of "trying to eat up the county."*

> *One small district felt that larger districts had no incentive to cooperate. "If [larger districts] don't help you, they'll force you out of existence and get your students for free."*

- Larger districts sometimes feel unfairly burdened when cooperating with smaller districts that are rapidly losing students and money.

> *One larger district sharing grades with a smaller district noted that "we pay two-thirds of the cost but have only half the control."*

- Different size districts can find it difficult to divide curriculum "fairly" -- so all districts feel they are equal partners.

> *One smaller district, unable to offer the full core curriculum, sends students to a larger district for many required courses. The smaller district continues to reduce core curriculum to offer specialized coursework that attracts students from the larger district. The smaller district is unhappy with the inequitable division of the core curriculum.*

Governance can be cumbersome.

Each set of cooperating districts must decide how to jointly administer their cooperative program. For districts involved in difficult cooperation, particularly those that share grades,

joint administration becomes a balancing act involving all participating districts. Two primary patterns of governance emerge:

1. Districts create a joint advisory board without real decision making power. Consensus must be reached between the individual boards.

2. Districts create a powerful joint decision making board or steering committee. Individual boards continue to meet, usually to consider issues relevant to the specific district.

In some cases, each board meets at different times. In other cases, all boards meet together. In many cases, decision making is a very cumbersome process. Many superintendents report frustration in trying to manage both individual school boards and joint boards.

"[Managing cooperation] is too much sometimes. I'm tired on Mondays."

"There's not enough time in the day. Too much paperwork and travel."

Administration can be difficult and impractical.

Although over half the districts we surveyed have no problems with the cooperation, many districts do report that a number of practical problems occur while planning, implementing, and maintaining cooperative programs. Some districts are concerned about issues such as where to hold graduation and homecoming. Most problems involve scheduling and transportation.

Scheduling: Districts often have great difficulty arranging compatible schedules for students. Many districts report trouble jointly arranging their calendars. This is primarily a problem during planning and implementation.

Transportation: Transportation problems surface as districts plan cooperation and they continue to be an ongoing problem.

- Selling changes in student transportation to parents is often a bigger problem than actually managing the transportation.
- Transportation for most cooperative programs does not involve any significant distance, but when it does, it causes problems.
- The need to transport students for part of the day creates the most problems. One superintendent reports that some students spend one full class period a day on the bus.

- Where it is an option, many districts report fewer problems when teachers or administrators travel instead of students.

Many of the districts sharing only teachers or sharing teachers as part of sharing grades report some unique problems, including:

- managing staff reductions (e.g. joint seniority lists and unrequested leave);
- teachers in cooperating districts on different salary schedules; and
- teachers encountering different environments at different schools.

III. WHAT ROLES DO SUPERINTENDENTS, PARENTS, STUDENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS PLAY?

Superintendents, parents, and members of the community usually agree that providing a quality education for the children is the primary goal of each district. However, differences may arise among them over how to best reach that goal.

Some districts move toward cooperation as a result of parental pressure.

Parental concern with maximizing educational opportunities for their children often gives school boards the support they need to initiate cooperation with other districts and provide that opportunity. Many superintendents give parents much of the credit for implementing cooperation. According to one superintendent *"parents felt the status quo was a step backwards."*

More often, superintendents find parents and the community to be the greatest impediment to cooperation.

Parents and community members sometimes feel that it is in the best interests of education to keep schools in the community and maintain the control of education within the district. Local businesses feel that schools are a critical factor in the survival of the community. These concerns often make parents and other members of the community wary of cooperation.

In many cases, superintendents are frustrated that cooperation is not moving as quickly as they

think it should. In these districts many parents and community members fight cooperation, afraid that consolidation will be the next step.

> *"We faced organized resistance from a stubborn public. The public is five years behind."*

Although many superintendents stress the importance of keeping the community well informed, some suggest minimizing public involvement in the planning process.

> *"Don't involve the public as much [as] educators, steering committees, board members, and staff. Only use the public for input."*

Superintendents' goals may conflict with those of parents and community members.

Many superintendents stress the need to keep academic goals in mind when designing cooperation. Over and over we heard tremendous concern about the ways parents and community members affect cooperation. Many in the community are fearful about consolidation, about losing schools, and often about losing athletic teams. In many of these cases, superintendents believe that it is these fears that are driving cooperation decisions -- not concern about providing the best educational opportunities for students.

> *"Don't lose sight of your goal. Do academics first, then athletics -- not the other way around."*

In some cases, superintendents maintain that *"cooperation is not always what's best for the kids"*. In many of these cases, parents and community members are pushing hard for cooperation instead of consolidation -- often for what superintendents believe to be all the wrong reasons.

Community pressure may affect the type of cooperation districts choose.

Parents, community members, and local businesses may pressure school boards to use forms of cooperation that will keep schools open and avoid consolidation. Some superintendents report that community pressure has forced school boards to drop consideration of cooperative secondary facilities in favor of cooperation that does not involve closing the high school. In other districts school board members are chosen because of their position on cooperation.

> *"After a management assistance study recommended consolidation, cooperation became the election issue for the school board. We had tremendous voter turnout and the pro-cooperation candidates were elected."*

Students are often a critical factor in successful cooperation.

Many superintendents emphasize that a strong public relations program can swing opinion toward cooperation.

> *"The students were really scared about going part-time [to another district]. They didn't think they'd belong. The other district has been very helpful and communicative. They've done school tours and informational meetings for the students. It really put the students at ease."*

If students are pleased with the results of cooperation, even parents opposed to cooperation often become supporters.

> *"Acceptance [of cooperation] came rapidly when parents saw that students loved the new program."*
>
> *"Kids become the greatest supporters of cooperation."*

IV. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

State policy on school district cooperation in Minnesota is to offer districts a variety of organizational alternatives and some financial support but to leave decisions about cooperation to individual districts. Within this context, districts have come to use cooperation in four fundamental ways:

- to maintain or expand curriculum;
- to manage low or declining enrollment;
- to save schools, avoid consolidation, and maintain autonomy;
- to control costs.

If maintaining or expanding curriculum is an important goal of cooperation...

- **Cooperation is a great success.** Superintendents in all types of districts report the use of three primary forms of cooperation (sharing students, teachers, or grades) to provide students with greater curricular breadth and depth. With the freedom to tailor

cooperation to meet their needs, districts design a tremendous variety of cooperative arrangements that build on their strengths.

- **But districts still face some problems with curricular cooperation.** Some of the problems superintendents report include: difficulties with the governance and administration of multiple, cooperating districts; problems transporting students; problems establishing joint schedules; and problems when districts are different sizes.

If controlling cost is an important goal of cooperation...

- **Cooperation is often a cost effective tool.** Many superintendents stress that without cooperation they could not afford to offer as many courses or programs. The alternative to a cooperative program is often no program at all.

- **But cooperation does not usually reduce districts' costs.** Superintendents emphasize that it is more expensive to offer a program cooperatively than to not offer it at all. Although some superintendents did report that cooperation reduced costs, it was unclear in these cases how the curriculum had been affected.

If managing low and declining enrollments is an important goal of cooperation...

- **Cooperation can work well.** Superintendents in small districts are not alone in having to manage enrollment problems. Even moderate to large districts sometimes have too few students in some areas to justify independently offering many advanced and elective courses. For these districts, superintendents find cooperation to be a very valuable tool.

- **But cooperation may simply be prolonging the life of some weak districts.** For some districts with very low or severely declining enrollments, consolidation or other reorganization is probably inevitable.

If saving schools, avoiding consolidation, and maintaining autonomy are important goals of cooperation...

- **Cooperation can be very successful.** Superintendents in some districts report that without cooperation, their districts would have lost a school or been forced to consolidate.

- **But there are some districts for which cooperation cannot offer sufficient support.** These districts often have severe financial difficulties and very low or steeply declining enrollment. For these districts, *"cooperation is only delaying the inevitable"*.

Superintendents in many of these districts stress that cooperation is chosen, at least in part, in response to pressure from parents, alumni, and members of the community. These districts, practically and politically, cannot choose alternatives such as consolidation. Superintendents in some of these districts want fewer choices.

> *"You need to restructure districts from the outside; we can't do it, politically, from the inside."*

If all decisions about cooperation are left to individual districts, there will inevitably be some districts slowly, cooperatively *"strangling to death"*.